

Regulatory activities

Child Psychiatrist Dr Bruce Perry states that intervention needs to take place within the following sequence of engagement – regulate, relate, then reason (the 3 R's). This means that to ensure children and young people's 'thinking brains' are "open for business", they need to first be regulated. Sensory activities, such as sport/exercise, music and art, are particularly important in promoting regulation and therefore readiness for learning. Dr Perry explains that regulatory activities work best when they are in line with these 6R's:

- Relational (offered by a safe adult).
- Relevant (developmentally-matched rather than matched to their chronological age).
- Repetitive (patterned).
- Rewarding (pleasurable).
- Rhythmic (resonant with regulating neural patterns).
- Respectful (of the child and family).

Some ideas for 'bottom-up' (brainstem) repetitive rhythmic repetitive regulatory and relational activities include (the first step to be addressed before results can be seen with relational or reasoning/cognitive interventions):

- Sport, P.E. lessons.
- Walking, crawling, skipping, running, running on the spot.
- Trampoline, trampette.
- Yoga.
- Stretching, warm-ups.
- Push ups, sit ups, jumping, star jumps, squat jumps.
- Tug of war, push and pull activities, wall presses, pushing against the wall, pushing hands together with force.
- Carrying heavy items, handing out books, resistance equipment or weights.
- Stacking chairs.
- Collecting equipment, taking items to reception.
- Cleaning a whiteboard.
- Falling into crashmats or pillows.
- Hula hooping.
- Stepping stones, hopscotch.
- Exercise ball.
- Movement breaks.
- Sensory diet/circuit/obstacle course/room.
- Hugs, big bear hug.
- Hand squeezes, hand massage.
- Body squeezes, body massage.
- Rocking, rocking chair.
- Balance activities e.g. walking along a line, balance beam or tightrope.
- Climbing equipment.
- Building activities.
- Breathing exercises, mindfulness, body scan.
- Listening to music, playing an instrument (e.g. drumming).
- Singing, humming, motherese tones.
- Dancing, dance routines.
- Clapping, tapping e.g. on shoulders left to right, class to repeat tapping pattern on desk.
- Walking to the beat in a song.
- Musical chairs.

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- Ordering, sorting, organising, matching.
- Blowing bubbles.
- PlayDoh/putty.
- Fidget toys.
- Brushing hair, plaiting hair.
- Art, drawing, doodling, air drawing, mindful colouring.
- Tasting/smelling alerting foods (e.g. lemons), crunchy foods (e.g. carrots), chewy foods (e.g. raisins, gum), sucking foods (e.g. fruit juice ice-lollies, smoothies).
- Stroking animals, therapy dog/cat.
- Weighted blankets/jackets etc.
- Finding one's heart rate.

Some ideas for relational activities (limbic system) include:

- 'Therapeutic web'/team of key adults approach.
- Meet and greet.
- Safe space/place to go, supported by a key adult.
- Appropriate touch.
- Transitional objects (e.g. friendship bracelets).
- Emotional check-ins.
- Time to talk, special time.
- Showing visitors around the school.
- Therapeutic play, theraplay, play therapy, therapeutic parenting.
- Intensive interaction.
- Extra-curricular group activities with peers.
- Peer mentoring, buddy systems with peers.
- Nurture or social skills groups.
- Games.

Some ideas for 'top-down' reasoning/cognitive (cortex) activities include:

- Emotional literacy work.
- Anxiety management CBT programmes/workbooks e.g. starving the anxiety gremlin.
- Talking therapies.
- Learning activities.
- Restorative approaches.
- Social stories, comic strip conversations.
- Mindfulness with words e.g. HeadSpace.
- Emotion coaching.

Top tips:

- Regulatory activities need to be personalised - there is no one-size-fits-all approach.
- Start with 'alerting' activities (to up-regulate/wake up the brain), then 'organising' activities (body and brain working together), and end with 'calming' activities (to down-regulate).
- Incorporate a 'sensory diet' of activities into the child's timetable e.g. before lessons.
- Activities can be used at an individual, whole class or whole school level, as well as at home.

Further information can be found here:

- Beacon House – brainstem calmers. <https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Brainstem-Calmer-Activities.pdf>.
- Book: Mount Saint Vincent Creative Arts Therapy Department. With Bruce Perry. Doodles, dances and ditties: A somatosensory handbook.

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